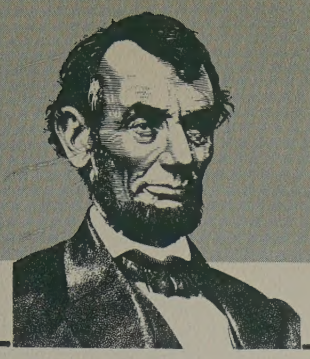


Lincoln Lore

Bulletin of The Lincoln National Life Foundation . . . Dr. R. Gerald McMurtry, Editor
Published each month by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 1484 FORT WAYNE, INDIANA October, 1961

LINCOLN: POET OR RHYMESTER?

Was Lincoln a mere rhymester—a maker of poor verse? Lincoln experienced "feelings . . . which were certainly poetry" but in a letter to Andrew Johnston, a Quincy, Illinois lawyer, he questioned "whether (his) expression of those feelings is poetry." Apparently Lincoln thought himself a failure as a poet. He read the poetry of others with appreciation and understanding (See Harkness & McMurtry's book "Lincoln's Favorite Poets." University of Tennessee Press, 1959). Yet he always labored under the belief that the true poetic gift was beyond his reach.

While Lincoln's vehicle of expression was not rhymed verse "there is a deep and abiding vein of pure poetry that runs all through his speeches." Richard Hanser in an article entitled "Lincoln and Poetry" has written that "today scholars write of his speeches as 'applied art' and discuss the "subtle rhythms and cadences' of his style. Of his most memorable lines it is now said that 'they haunt the memory as much for their sound as their meaning.'"

Lincoln's earliest poetic efforts found expression in the form of doggerel verse inscribed in his sum book:

"Abraham Lincoln his hand and pen
he will be good but god knows
When"

On the same page Lincoln wrote in a more serious vein:

"Time What an emty vaper tis and
days how swift they are swift as
an indian (arr(ow) fly or like a
shooting star the present moment
Just (is here) then slides away in
(haste) that we (can) never say
they ('re ours) but (only say th(ey)
're past"

Another page of Lincoln's sum book carries this bit of doggerel:

"Abraham Lincoln is my name
And with my pen I wrote the same
I wrote in both hast and speed
and left it here for fools to read"

Legend has it that as a young man Lincoln wrote an epitaph for a Kickapoo Indian, named Johnny Kongapod. It has the ring of Lincoln's literary style but there is no factual evidence available to prove that Lincoln is the author:

"Here lies poor Johnny Kongapod
Have mercy on him, gracious God
As he would do if he was God
And you were Johnny Kongapod"

Lincoln's major effort is a twenty-five stanza poem titled after the first line of stanza one, "My childhood home I see again." Lincoln evidently hastily jotted down a rough draft sometime in 1844 after visiting his old home in Indiana. The original manuscript, now owned by the Library of Congress, when compared with later published versions, reveals that Lincoln gave this poem a great deal of his time and attention. The May 29, 1939 edition of *Lincoln Lore*, number 529 entitled "Abraham Lincoln: Poet" provides the original text with the words in italics that were discarded and with footnotes indicating the words that were substituted. This study was made by Dr. Louis A. Warren, the former editor of *Lincoln Lore*. (See the illustrated cut in this bulletin).

The revised edition of twenty-four stanzas bears the supposed date of February 25, 1846. (See "The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln". Volume 1, 1824-1848, Rutgers University Press, pages 367-370). The editors of "The Collected Works" state that they "have dated it the day following Lincoln's letter to Andrew Johnston because in that letter Lincoln specifies that the poem is 'almost done.'"

In a letter to Johnston, dated April 18, 1846 Lincoln explained the circumstances leading to the writing of the poem: "In the fall of 1844, thinking I might aid some to carry the State of Indiana for Mr. Clay, I went into the neighborhood in that State in which I was raised, where my mother and only sister were buried, and from which I had been absent about fifteen years. That part of the country is, within itself, as unpoetical as any spot of the earth; but still, seeing it and its objects and inhabitants aroused feelings in me which were certainly poetry; though whether my expression of those feelings is poetry is quite another question. When I got to writing, the change of subjects divided the thing into four little divisions or cantos, the first only of which I send you now and may send the others hereafter."

The first canto which Lincoln sent Johnston consisted of ten stanzas, the first ten of the poem of the original manuscript. The version sent Johnston was a revision of the original as is indicated by *Lincoln Lore* number 529.

On September 6, 1848 Lincoln again wrote to Johnston, "You remember when I wrote you from Tremont last spring, sending you a little canto of what I called poetry, I promised to bore you with another some time. I now fulfil the promise. The subject of the present one is an insane man. His name is Matthew Gentry. He is three older than I, and when we were boys we went to school together. He was rather a bright lad, and the son of *the* rich man of our very poor neighborhood. At the age of nineteen he unaccountably became furiously mad, from which condition he gradually settled down into harmless insanity. When, as I told you in my other letter I visited my old home in the fall of 1844, I found him still lingering in this wretched condition. In my poetizing mood I could not forget the impressions his case made upon me."

This canto of thirteen stanzas is sometimes called "The Maniac." It consists of the revised verses eleven to twenty-two of the original manuscript with stanza twenty-three deleted, and with the addition of the stanza:

"O death! Thou awe-inspiring
prince,
That keepst the world in fear;
Why dost thou tear more blest ones
hence,
And leave him ling'ring here?"

Lincoln closed his September 6, 1846 letter to Johnston with the statement: "If I should ever send another, the subject will be a 'Bear hunt.'" This poem, dated September 6, 1846 by the editors of "The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln" consists of twenty-two stanzas. It appears from the two concluding stanzas of the original and uncorrected version of "My childhood home . . ." that the "Bear Hunt" was a part of the original composition. The next to the last stanza appears to mark the beginning of a third canto of a more pleasant topic.

Lincoln's robust poem, the "Bear Hunt" has something "of the flavor of a wilderness folk tale." While "My childhood home . . ." reveals a melancholy vein in Lincoln's nature. The

ABRAHAM LINCOLN: POET

A manuscript in Abraham Lincoln's own hand which has recently been presented to the Library of Congress by Mary Lincoln Isham of Washington is of intense interest to Lincoln students, as it reveals how Lincoln's choice of words improved when he could give some time and attention to his written compositions.

Upon visiting his old home in Indiana in 1844 he was stirred to write some poetry which evidently he jotted down hastily. An occasion arose, however, for him to submit the poetry to a friend which caused him to go over the manuscript carefully, dividing the long poem into two cantos.

Copies of the two revised cantos have been published, but now for the first time the original and uncorrected manuscript is available. Four new stanzas of poetry which Lincoln failed to include in his revised writing are now presented, and it is also discovered that he wrote one new stanza, not appearing in the original, to conclude one of the cantos after the revision was made.

After reading the first draft of the part of the poem relating to the insane youth, Matthew Gentry, one is deeply impressed by Lincoln's reaction to the tragedy of his school companion.

It also appears from this manuscript as if his poem on "The Bear Hunt" was also a part of the original composition. The two concluding stanzas seem to be transition verses which anticipate the writing of a more pleasant theme—

"And now away to seek some scene
Less painful than the last."

Lincoln left unchanged the word joined—pronounced by him "jined" to rime with mind—indicating that as late as 1844 it was in good usage in his vocabulary at least.

The text as Lincoln first wrote it is herewith presented. The words which were discarded for more satisfactory ones are placed in italics and the substituted expressions are to be found in the footnotes.

My *childhood* home I see again 1
And *gladden* with the view, 2
And still as *mem'ries* crowd my brain 3
There's *sadness* in it too. 4

O Memory, thou midway world 5
Twixt earth and paradise, 6
Where things decayed and loved ones lost 7
In dreamy shadows rise, 8

And freed from all that's *gross or* vile, 9
Seems hallowed, pure and bright 10
Like scenes in some enchanted *vale* 11
All bathed in liquid light. 12

As *distant* mountains please the eye 13
When twilight chases day 14
As *brighter tones* that, passing by, 15
In distance die away; 16

As leaving some grand waterfall 17
We lingering list its roar 18
So memory will hallow all 19
We've known, but know no more 20

Now twenty years have passed away 21
Since here I *bade* farewell 22
To woods, *to field* and scenes of play 23
And *schoolmates* loved so well. 24

Where many were *how* few remain 25
Of old familiar things, 26
But seeing *these* to mind again 27
The lost and absent brings. 28

The friends I left that parting day, 29
How changed, as time has sped; 30
Young childhood *gone*, strong manhood gray, 31
And half of all are dead. 32

I hear the *lone* survivors tell 33
How naught from death could save, 34
Till every sound appears a knell, 35
And every spot a grave. 36

I range the fields with pensive tread, 37
I pace the hollow rooms, 38
And feel, companion of the dead, 39
I'm living in *their* tombs. 40

And here's an object more of dread 41
Than aught the grave contains, 42
A human form with reason fled 43
While wretched life remains. 44

Poor Matthew, once of genius bright, 45
A fortune-favored child, 46
Now locked for aye in mental night, 47
A haggard madman wild. 48

Poor Matthew, I have ne'er forgot 49
When first with maddened will 50
Yourself you maimed, your father fought, 51
Your mother strove to kill. 52

And terror spread and neighbors ran 53
Your dang'rous strength to bind, 54
And soon a howling crazy man 55
Your limbs were fast confined. 56

How then you *writhed* and shrieked aloud 57
Your bones and sinews bared, 58
And fiendish on the *gaping* crowd 59
With burning eye-balls glared, 60

And begged and swore and wept and prayed 61
With maniac laughter *joined;* 62
How painful *are the pains* displayed 63
By pangs that kill the mind. 64

And when at length, *tho* drear and long 65
Time soothed *your* fiercer woes, 66
How plaintively *your* mournful song 67
Upon the still night rose. 68

I've heard it oft as if I dreamed, 69
Far distant, sweet and lone. 70
The funeral dirge it ever seemed 71
Of reason dead and gone. 72

To drink its *drams* I've stole away, 73
All *silently* and still, 74
Ere yet the rising God of Day 75
Had streaked the eastern hill. 76

Air held *its* breath and *trees all still* 77
Seemed sorrowing angels round; 78
Their swelling tears in dewdrops fell 79
Upon the list'ning ground. 80

But this is past and naught remains 81
That raised *you* o'er the brute; 82
Your *maddening* shrieks and soothing strains, 83
Are like forever mute. 84

Now fare thee well, more thou the cause 85
Than subject now of woe; 86
All mental pangs by time's kind *hand* 87
Hast lost the power to know. 88

And now away to seek some scene 89
Less painful than the last 90
With less of horror mingled in 91
The present and the past. 92

The very spot where grew the bread 93
That formed my bones I see, 94
How strange old field on thee to tread 95
And feel I'm part of thee. 96

1. childhood's
2. sudden
3. memory crowds
4. pleasure
5. earthly
11. isle
18. dusky
19. bugle notes
21. near
22. bid
23. and fields
24. playmate
25. but
27. them
31. grown
33. loved
38. and
40. the
41. but
43. the
45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52—omitted
57. strove
59. gazing
62. pronounced jined —did not change
63. were these signs
65. the
66. thy
67. thy
73. strains
74. stealthily
77. her—"trees with the spell"
79. whose
82. thee
83. piercing
87. laws
89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, omitted from the original text with the following new concluding stanza substituted:

"O death! Thou awe-inspiring prince
That keepst the world in fear
Why dost thou tear more blest ones hence
And leave him lingering here."

***Lincoln Lore*, Number 529. "Abraham Lincoln: Poet", May 29, 1939.**

"Bear Hunt" gives an insight into a happy experience of his youth:

"A wild-bear chace, didst never see?
Then hast thou lived in vain.
Thy richest bump of glorious glee,
Lies desert in thy brain.

'When first my father settled here,
'Twas then the frontier line:
The panther's scream, filled night with fear
And bears preyed on the swine.

"But wo for Bruin's short lived fun,
When rose the squealing cry;
Now man and horse, with dog and gun,
For vengeance, at him fly.

"A sound of danger strikes his ear;
He gives the breeze a snuff:
Away he bounds, with little fear,
And seeks the tangled *rough*.

"On press his foes, and reach the ground,
Where's left his half munched meal;
The dogs, in circles, scent around,
And find his fresh made trail.

"With instant cry, away they dash,
And men as fast pursue;
O'er logs they leap, through water splash,
And shout the brisk halloo.

"Now to elude the eager pack,
Bear shuns the open ground;
Th(r)ough matted vines, he shapes his track
And runs it, round and round.

"The tall fleet cur, with deep-mouthed voice,
Now speeds him, as the wind;
While half-grown pup, and short-legged fice,
Are yelping far behind.

"And fresh recruits are dropping in
To join the merry corps:
With yelp and yell,—a mingled din—
The woods are in a roar.

"And round, and round the chace now goes,
The world's alive with fun;
Nick Carter's horse, his rider throws,
And more, Hill drops his gun.

"Now sorely pressed, bear glances back,
And lolls his tired tongue;
When as, to force him from his track,
An ambush on him sprung.

"Across the glade he sweeps for flight,
And fully is in view.
The dogs, new-fired, by the sight,
Their cry, and speed, renew.

"The foremost ones, now reach his rear,
He turns, they dash away;
And circling now, the wrathful bear,
They have him full at bay.

"At top of speed, the horse-men come,
All screaming in a row.
'Whoop! Take him Tiger. Seize him Drum.'
Bang,—bang—the rifles go.

"And furious now, the dogs he tears,
And crushes in his ire.
Wheels right and left, and upward rears,
With eyes of burning fire.

"But leaden death is at his heart,
Vain all the strength he plies.
And, spouting blood from every part,
He reels, and sinks, and dies.

"And now a dinsome clamor rose,
'Bout who should have his skin;
Who first draws blood, each hunter knows,
This prize must always win.

"But who did this, and how to trace
What's true from what's a lie,
Like lawyers, in a murder case
They stoutly *argufy*.

Aforesaid fice, of blustering mood,
Behind, and quite forgot,
Just now emerging from the wood,
Arrives upon the spot.

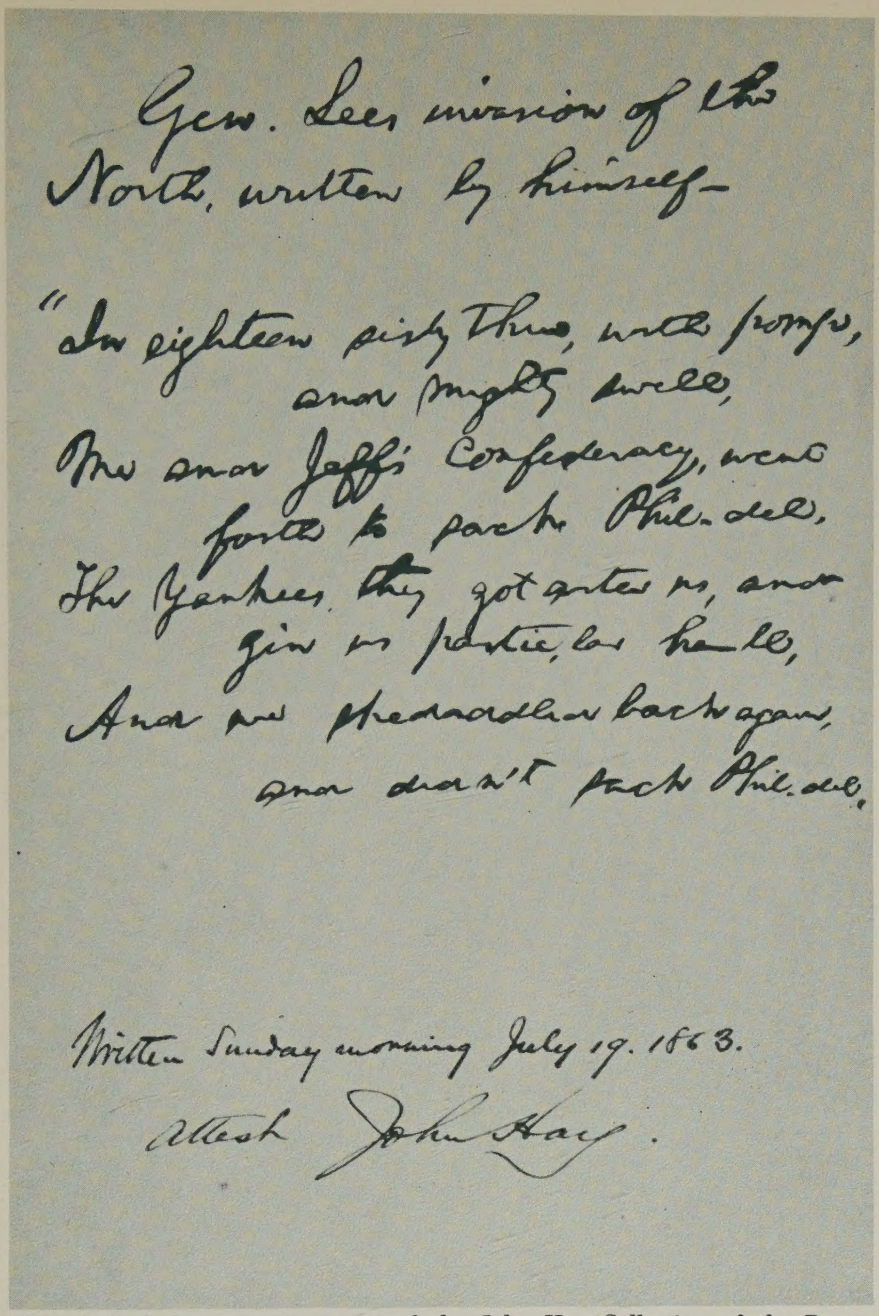
"With grinning teeth, and up-turned hair—
Brim full of spunk and wrath,
He growls, and seizes on dead bear,
And shakes for life and death.

"And swells as if his skin would tear,
And growls and shakes again;
And swears, as plain as dog can swear,
That he has won the skin.

"Conceited whelp! we laught at thee—
Nor mind, that not a few
Of pompous two-legged dogs there be,
Conceited quite as you."

The editors of "The Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln" Volume I, 1824-1848, page 392, in a note relative to Lincoln's letter (February 25, 1847) to Johnston state that, "In the Quincy *Whig* for May 5, 1847, Johnston published anonymously the first two cantos, giving them as a main title 'The Return' and as subtitles 'Part I—Reflection.' 'Part II—The Maniac.' Quotations from Lincoln's letter provided the 'prefatory remarks.' The third canto mentioned by Lincoln does not appear in the *Whig*. If, as may be supposed, the third canto consisted of 'The Bear Hunt' Johnston may well have concluded that it was unsuitable for printing as a companion piece to the other cantos." Johnston assented to Lincoln's stipulation that the "names be suppressed by all means. I have not sufficient hope of the verses attracting any favorable notice to tempt me to risk being ridiculed for having written them."

During the spring and summer of 1846 Lincoln gave a lot of thought to literary pursuits. There was published in the Quincy *Whig*, April 15, 1846 an article entitled "The Trailor Murder Case" with a sub-title "Remarkable Case of Arrest For Murder." While this narrative was published



Gen. Lees invasion of the North, written by himself—

"In eighteen sixty Three, with pomp,
and mighty swell,
Me and Jeff's Confederacy, went
forth to sack Phil-del,
The Yankees they got arter us, and
gin us particular hell,
And we skedaddled back again,
and didn't sack Phil-del.

Written Sunday morning July 19. 1863.
Attest John Hay.

This original document is a part of the John Hay Collection of the Brown University Library, Providence, Rhode Island.

anonymously, the identity of the author was known by Lincoln's associates. Ward H. Lamon's biography "The Life of Abraham Lincoln; From His Birth To His Inauguration as President" James R. Osgood and Company, 1872, pages 317-318, carries the statement that, "The circumstances (of the murder case) impressed him very deeply with the insufficiency and, danger of 'circumstantial evidence;' so much so, that he not only wrote the following account to Speed (June 19, 1841), but another more extended one, which was printed in a newspaper published at Quincy, Ill."

In regard to Lincoln's labors for art's sake the Lamon biography carries the following comment concerning Lincoln's literary treatment of the Trailor murder case: "There is nothing constrained, and nothing studied or deliberate about it; but its simplicity, perspicuity, and artless grace make it a model of English composition." A further statement about Lincoln's prose, in connection with his treatment of the murder case was that, "He never says more nor less than he ought, and never makes use of a word that he could have changed for a better."

After publication in the Quincy *Whig* Lincoln's article was copied a week later by the *Sangamo Journal.* This contribution in prose undoubtedly resulted from the literary friendship between Lincoln and Johnston. The article is well written and would merit publication, even anonymously, in a modern periodical. (See "The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln" Volume I, 1824-1848, pages 371-376).

In 1858 while Lincoln was the guest of a Winchester, Illinois hotel proprietor, he had occasion to write some verses in the autograph album of the two daughters of the innkeeper, Rosa and Linnie Haggard. These original verses, (the manuscripts are the property E. G. Miner of Rochester, New York) follow:

"To Rosa—
"You are young, and I am older;
You are hopeful, I am not—
Enjoy life, ere it grow colder—
Pluck the roses ere they rot.

"Teach your beau to heed the lay—
That sunshine soon is lost in shade—
That *now's* as good as any day—
To take thee, Rosa, ere she fade.

"Winchester, Sep. 28, 1858. A. Lincoln—"

The verse "To Linnie" written two days later on September 30, 1858 follows:

"To Linnie—
"A sweet plaintive song did I hear,
And I fancied that she was the singer—
May emotions as pure, as that song set a-stir
Be the worst that the future shall bring her.

"Winchester Sept. 30—1858—A. Lincoln—"

Lincoln is also known to have written, while a Springfield lawyer, some rather undignified lines incorporating spoonerisms—which are defined as a transposition of sounds, usually the initial sounds of two or more words. The dictionary gives an example: "A blushing crow for a crushing blow." The use of spoonerisms was a highly popular form of humor in frontier days. One such production in Lincoln's hand is owned by Nathaniel E. Stein, a former president of The Manuscript Society. Lincoln's "Short Short Story" appeared for the first time in facsimile in the Fall 1956 issue of *Gentry Magazine.*

As president of the United States Lincoln on occasion continued to compose doggerel verse. Two weeks after the battle of Gettysburg Lincoln wrote a humorous piece which was mentioned in John Hay's diary, under the date of July 19, 1863. The entry (deleted in part in Hay's three volume published diary) follows: "The Tycoon was in a very good humor. Early in the morning he scribbled this doggerel and gave it to me." This original verse in Lincoln's handwritting is now a part of the Brown University collection:

"Gen. Lee's invasion of the North written by himself.

"In eighteen sixty three, with pomp and mighty swell/Me and Jeff's Confederacy, went forth to sack Phil-del/The Yankees they got arter us, and gin us particular hell/And we skidaddled back again, and didn't sack Phil-del."/

Below this verse Lincoln's private secretary appended the following in-

formation: "Written Sunday Morning July 19, 1863 Attest John Hay."

Apparently Lincoln liked to "mess around with words," to use the expression of a modern writer. In the more sophisticated poetry circles the statement has been made that "the end product of poetry is knowledge." Certainly this statement is true in regard to Abraham Lincoln's poetry. What better word picture do we have of Lincoln's Indiana boyhood than "My Childhood Home . . ." and the "Bear Hunt"? Even Lincoln's doggerel verse, spoonerisms and burlesque verse give us an insight into Lincoln's nature which might not have been revealed except in rhymed verse. Words are the most essential tools of knowledge and the Sixteenth President was a skilled craftsman, even though poetry was not his forte.

WILLIAM KNOX'S MONUMENT

Abraham Lincoln's favorite poem was "Mortality" by William Knox. The poem was published in a collection of works, the title page of which follows. "The/Lonely Hearth,/ The Songs of Israel,/Harp of Zion./And/ Other Poems/By/ William Knox./ London:/John Johnstone, 26 Paternoster Row,/ And 15 Prince Street, Edinburgh./1847."

This book of poems was presented to President Lincoln by General James Grant Wilson. For twenty years Lincoln had endeavored to identify the author and he was pleased to learn from General Wilson that his favorite poem was written by William Knox, a young Scottish poet who died in 1825. After his election to the presidency many newspaper reporters erroneously attributed the poem "Mortality" to Lincoln. The poem appears on pages 95 to 97 of the book. Lincoln's gift copy is not known to be extant. Only three copies of Knox's collected verse are known to exist in America. One copy is the property of Henry B. Bass of Enid, Oklahoma, and another copy is located at Lincoln Memorial University. A third copy belonged to the late M. L. Houser of Peoria, Illinois. He left this book to Bradley University from which library it seems to have disappeared.

William Knox, died of a paralytic stroke and was buried in the New Calton Cemetery in Edinburgh, Scotland. His was one of the early interments. His monument is an obelisk inscribed as follows: "Sacred to the memory of William Knox, eldest son of Thomas Knox and Barbara Turnbull of Firth, Roxburgshire, who died at Leith, 12th November, 1825, aged 36. Author of 'The Harp of Zion,' etc. (Quotation)."

On the same side of this four sided monument appears this inscription: "This monument was erected in loving admiration of the poet and his works by his grand-nephew Thomas Lang of Calcutta & Bombay, Nov. 1895." On another side of the obelisk is the statement that William Knox was "a branch of the stock of the great reformer John Knox." A third side of the monument bears the following inscription: "The poem entitled Mortality by Author Knox is engraved in letters of gold on the walls of the Imperial Palace St. Petersburg. It was also the favorite poem of Abraham Lincoln who repeated verses from it on the day of his assassination." Carved directly below the above mentioned inscription are the first and last stanzas of the twelve stanza poem:

This original photograph was presented to the Lincoln National Life Foundation by E. E. Whitney, Hingham, Massachusetts.

"Oh! Why should the spirit of mortal be proud?
Like a swift fleeting meteor, a fast flying cloud,
A flash of the lightening, a break in the wave,
He passeth from life to his rest in the grave.

" 'Tis the wink of an eye, 'tis the draught of a breath
From the blossom of health to the paleness of death;
From the gilded saloon to the bier and the shroud;
Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?"